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The Story of a Toiler



By

ANDREW FRANZEN

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I

My workshop is the paper mill.
Its mighty boss controls my will.
Its wheels and rollers set my speed—
All goaded by the owner's greed.

But when in dusky eventide
The toiler seeks his fireside
I may walk the path I choose.
Then touches me some minor muse,
So that I can in soulful spell
My woes in measured numbers tell.

I hardly would compare myself
With Shakespeare, for he wrote for pelf,
Grew rich and fat in Stratford town,
While I am lean and trodden down.
No doubt when he struck loud his lyre
His spirit rose and fluttered higher,

For he lived high on beef and ale,
While half-full is my dinner-pail.
A half-fed man, he lives but half,
Like the aged on his staff.

I am a man of little school,
But never have been called a fool,
And never had the lust for knowledge
Spurred me to find it in a college.
In simple words the humbly taught
Express the scholar's gems of thought.
Yet are my lines not always smooth,
Be sure, I aim to tell the truth.
So listen to my simple tale!
You shall not find it dull or stale,
But sometimes sad and sometimes light,
As life itself upon its flight.

II

Some other troubles blight my life,
For, understand, I have a wife
Whose temper waxes worse and worse
As leaner grow my face and purse.
She goes in trim and stylish dress
While oft my shirt is buttonless.
Of course, some girls go fashion-wild,
Which harms no husband, kith or child.
And so I cannot well divine
For whom Belinda wants to shine.

I lay the blame to feminism.
'Tis worse than any other ism,
Brings gloom and chill to hearth and home,
Drives husbands out to drink or roam,

Dyspeptic and on downward course
From rotten canned-foods bought at stores.
Yes, cooking interferes with pleasure;
In short, 'tis work and curtails leisure.
I dare not take to court my plight,
For there a woman's always right.

A strange distemper of the mind
Is sweeping over womankind,
And I fear it spreads to others,
For women still are all men's mothers.

All this and more I will endure
For little Elsie sweet and pure,
My child from whom I would not part.
She is the treasure of my heart.
I know she's mine, for all can see
In features fine she looks like me.

In deep distress, despair or fears,
Some find relief in foolish tears,
But with the lightness of a clown
I often laugh my troubles down;
And oft I yield for my own sake—
The things that bend, they will not break.
We cannot know in pride's elation
The comfort found in resignation.

I also can more lightly live
By being not too sensitive.
The slightest pricking of a pin
Will pain the one whose skin is thin.
And when Belinda said to me:
"Your writing is not poetry:
I'll see, it might for kindling burn,"
I spoke no angry word in turn.

III

Now I am not a socialist,
Nor love the blood-red anarchist.
For me no far Utopia gleams.
The healthy have but seldom dreams,
Nor see they all the world awry,
With bodeful signs across the sky,
This world is always onward moving,
Its people changing, not improving,
Nor growing worse in countless years,
However it to us appears.

Life's old routine now we repeat
With toiling hands and wandering feet.
Mankind has ever multiplied
Until the poor of misery died,
And famine, war and pestilence
Swept the surplus millions hence.

Before the strong the weak must yield,
This earth is all one battlefield.
Each morn the hawk its breakfast chases,
The grizzly bear his prey embraces.
The laws of nations guards the gunner;
Theirs is the robber's code and honor.
The white race killed the red by might.
The yellow hosts will crush the white.
How many a human, if he can,
Will live upon his fellow man!
And he who robs my means of living
Preys on my life, beyond forgiving.
The Hellene race of high renown
Were mostly helots, trodden down.
The humble serf for ages trod

With clumsy feet his master's clod.

All this has been, now here am I
Perhaps a wage-slave till I die.
What else is he who must obey,
Accept abuse and can't say nay,
Nor even fix the wage and price
Of what he earns and what he buys.
Yes, change my master, that I can,
And change from fire to frying-pan;
And starve and tire while finding one,
Trudging from morn till sets the sun.

Certain of tomorrow's bread,
The negro slave had less to dread.
So slavery I must define:
A thing ordained by will divine.
But reading this, I trust they find
That they cannot enslave my mind.

And yet all men some burden bear;
So even does the millionaire,
For gold is weighing on the brain,
And sleepless lies the lust of gain,
And the time he would beguile
Is certainly not worth its while.
So we should bring him sympathy.
He's still of our humanity;
And if we all his millions had
Perhaps we should be just as bad.
Again, no man is half so black
As envy paints him on his back.
So I will not the rich abuse,
The poor from every sin excuse.

The rich or ragged idlers shirk,
Alike they live on others' work.

And somehow when in thoughtful mood
Upon the deeper things I brood,
I see a justice over all,
Through good and ill, through rise and fall.
Each punishment that I am taking,
I see, is all of my own making.
What moral right had I to wed,
Depending on a boss for bread;
To take in hand a child and wife,
With scarce enough for single life!
The young are blind to that great law,
Set forth by proverb, sage and saw:
An hour of throbbing ecstasy
Begets a day of misery.

How blest is he whose small desire
Does not to greater things aspire!
Not height, extent or large supplies,
But fullness it is that satisfies.
The brown chestnut is just as full
As the shiphold stuffed with wool.
The smallest circle is complete—
Why should we race with fever heat?
The fierce pursuit of happiness
Brings disappointment and distress.
By chasing, it cannot be caught.
Where it belongs it came unsought.
And fortune will more lightly flit
To those who do not look for it.
The smallest hut on earth may hold
All human bliss, unsought, untold.

The thought of this dispels my sadness
And warms my heart with sunny gladness.

IV

Tomorrow will be 'lection day
And all may vote, the bosses say.
Two candidates one office seek,
Both chosen by the selfsame clique.
They praise this great democracy
Where all are equal, all are free.
And others spout in vocal storm
Big mouthfuls of the sought reform.
Their party this our country saves,
So that the starry flag still waves.

As for myself I only tell:
I like to see us governed well.
The prudent, wise and just should rule
Not the base exploiter's tool.
Parties rise and parties fall.
The evil one controls them all.
They are but puppets in his hands.
He pipes to each its different dance,
And often dons another mask
Remaining at the selfsame task.
Our party spirit we should smother,
For its sets one against another.

A man of learning spoke to me
These words which well with me agree:
"Of greater things and higher aims
The herd of men but grasp the names.
To them the inner soul means less

Than trappings, color, form and dress.

“And while the sheep-like multitude
Is ever in believing mood
Will charlatans and fakirs thrive,
The medicine man and priest survive,
Will many eyes that see things double
Follow the rainbow-colored bubble,
Will signs on walls and bill-boards high
Tell dunces where and what to buy.
What wonder then that men will stare
On faces rouged or powder-fair;
That women flaunt in vain conceit
Their gorgeous plumes upon the street;
That I discovered to my grief,
My knowledge mostly was belief.”

Yet many men are true and pure,
And women virtuous and demure;
And oftentimes I feel so glad
That there is none who must be bad.

Were all the world intent on ill,
I know, I could be upright still;
And would deceive me all who can,
I still could be an honest man;
And all on earth, if they but would,
I know full well they could be good,
And all be happy, sound and whole
Through wisdom, love and self-control.
This earth might be a paradise
Of plenty, though were harsh the skies.

V

With weary feet and nigh forlorn
 I went to church one Sunday morn,
 And almost felt a starting tear,
 So holy seemed its atmosphere;
 But when I saw the grocer Theft,
 Who cheats on week days right and left,
 Singing on the lofty choir,
 With fervor like celestial fire;
 The real-estate man wrapt in prayer
 Who stole a widow's meager share;
 The lawyer who with vicious paw
 Manipulates the court and law,
 I thought 'twas all that I could bear
 And left, to breathe in God's pure air.
 With conscience and the Golden Rule
 I need no law nor Sunday school.

Give me the parson gent of old
 Who preached of hell and brimstone bold,
 Of earth a vale of wrong and sin,
 Of heaven where few could enter in.
 The sinners turned through his beseeching,
 For he himself believed his preaching.
 But with the parson of the present
 Truth is less than being pleasant.
 He makes the darker deeds look white,
 The lesser sins a sorry sight.
 His sermon would the hour beguile
 And God with Satan reconcile.

Yet several Christians I have met,
 And good example each had set.

Among them was a heathen Jap
Who clothed me with his coat and cap.
Another was a hungry lad
Who shared with me the last he had.
And other poor have succored me
While proudly passed the Pharisee.

Of faiths and creeds, I often thought,
Men will believe what they were taught.
Had all these pious Christian folk
Been reared to bear some sultan's yoke,
They would with equal faith today
On bended knees to Allah pray.
And Washington as rebel leader
Denounced by every school-boy's Reader
Would be today in ill repute
Had Briton won in her pursuit.

I read the scriptures through and through
But never thought they all were true;
I do not search for every flaw,
Nor care who was Cain's mother-in-law,
Nor swallow every Bible tale,
Like Jonah and the gulping whale;
And no hereafter do I fear,
For sin is amply punished here.

And yet I should not come to grief
For all my heathen unbelief,
For I don't think that God expected
Beliefs of me which are rejected
By the reason that He gave me;
Or else, not He nor man could save me.

When hopes of earthly wealth seem vain,
The greedy pray for heavenly gain.

If God is just as all are saying,
He'll do what's right without our praying.
Nor do I like to ask for favors;
It all too much of begging savors.
If praying helped I'd pray to be
A help to all the weak and wee,
So modest, meek and so content
That ne'er my mind on heaven were bent.

Yet sometimes while I breathe a sigh,
I think if I were God on high,
I'd make a better world than this,
All void of ill and full of bliss,
With plenty for each man's desire—
A world which angels might admire.
I'd have a different Bible writ,
Which would the present age befit,
With flashy stories bright and brief,
Compelling modern man's belief.

What mortal man can understand
Why God made bog and desert land,
The vermin and the pests on wings,
The snakes and sundry biting things,
The fleas that leap, the worms that crawl
And angels weak enough to fall?
Nor can I see why lucky Noah
Preserved the centipede and boa.

Does God reveal the mystery
Of nature and its history?
Perhaps 'tis not for us to know.
All things are so that should be so.
Yet man will ever strain his eye
For things too far or fine to spy.

Curiosity inordinate!
This appetite is hard to sate,
Is rated by the super-wise
As harmful as some baser vice.
Deeper down and deeper prying,
Farther on and farther spying!
The thread is up and still we weave!
Where knowledge ceases we believe.
Our superstitions once were mystic,
Now we take them scientific.
Dire ills once known by homely terms
Appear in microscopic germs.

I cannot see with tearful eye
A beautiful, a smiling sky.
The river's bend, the mountain's shoulder
Look not alike to each beholder;
And so 'tis true that God on high
Seems not the same to every eye.
Though upward looking on his knees
Each man but his own image sees;
And there are mystic minds that need
A mystical religious creed.

VI

When free and in poetic mood
I love to seek the solitude.
'Tis oft in quiet observation
That poets find their inspiration.
In nature's realm a life I find
More fair and true than humankind.
Her scenes and voices teach me more

Than sermons deep or bookish lore.
The butterfly on motley wing,
The woodland birds that blithely sing,
The busy bee at early start
Delight me more than human art.
I watch the ant whose world is bound
By some dead leaves that lie around.
To it, its realm is full as great
As to the king his far-bound state.
I wonder how the bug may feel
Whom happily just missed my heel,
And what the eagle circling round
May think of us upon the ground.
Whate'er man has, I well can see,
Some brute has too, in some degree.

At night I scan the planets far
Who see this earth a twinkling star.
Why, though our feet are fastened here,
Should we not look beyond our sphere?
We may not know the worlds up yonder,
But we may worship, we may wonder!
There is order in the sky.
Why should be things on earth awry?

At other times my wife and child
Attend me to the woodland wild.
We walk beneath the darksome pines
Where trustingly the ivy twines.
Then often while the zephyr sighs
I look into Belinda's eyes
Where still her better self is shining,
As through a cloud "the silver lining."
When mid the blossoms of the glen

She seems to be herself again,
And listening to the babbling brook
She casts on me the selfsame look
That spoke a language so enchanting
As ever lovers' lips were panting,
My soul expands to greater scope
With a remembrance and a hope.
And then it seems too sweet to tell,
As once when chimed the wedding bell;
Her eye so radiant, yet so meek,
The flush of morning on her cheek.
How modest seemed she and demure,
Betokening a heart as pure
As once when to a flowery land
She came from God's creating hand.

And then I see in Elsie fair
A bond between the parent pair
While turn her hazel eyes on me
And smile with childish witchery.
I wonder oft what she may think
While standing on the brooklet's brink
She sees her image in the deep
Where speckled troutlets upward leap,
Or what behold her dreamy eyes
When resting on the vacant skies.
Perhaps a distant wonderland
Where children play on wooded strand,
Or fairies draped in golden gauze
Dance velvet-shod on silken moss.
And such a sprightly little elf,
So full of fun is she herself!
And with a joy I do believe

Her mother far more blest than Eve
When, childless, she in Eden's bower
Might envy her of such a flower.

While Elsie's thoughts in dreamland seem
I also see a lovely dream:
A cottage in a fertile dell,
An oaken bucket o'er a well,
Potatoes on the hillside growing
And flowers in their season blowing;
The orchard's boughs with fruitage bent,
Exhaling their delicious scent;
A trusty dog to watch and warn,
And cackling hens around the barn.

Belinda dressed in home-made gown,
Far from the fashion-crazy town,
Its crowded haunts with sickening breath
Where Virtue limps to early death,
And dancing Vice unblushing smiles,
With crimsoned lips the young beguiles.
How selfish are its trading men!
How colorless their street-bound ken!

All densely growing forms of life
Are stunted by intenser strife.
God has not intended man
To grow as crowded as he can.
Most neighborly the neighbors are
Who live beyond the fields afar.

In nature free from artifice
We shall no natural pleasure miss.
And oh, what freedom will be ours
Upon the meads, among the flowers!
We'll grow the things which now we buy

At prices fixed by those up high.
And we shall do an earnest part
To find each lost domestic art.
From flax and wool upon our land
We'll make our clothes with busy hand.
With cupboards filled with home-made things
We'll live as free and rich as kings.
The middle man and money-monger
Will gather toll from us no longer.
The tawdry raiment sweatshop-made
Shall not our simple home invade.
Thus shall we gladly till the soil
To reap full fruitage of our toil.

And in the air of field and wood
Will Elsie grow to womanhood,
Will learn the household work and rules,
Not pranks and fads of city schools.
For most cannot afford to learn
What will not help their living earn.
What is to me the glove or mitt
That will not my finger fit!
The simple home-taught a, b, c
To all learning gives the key.

I seem to see her eyes a-gleam
With a maiden's blissful dream.
Beside a shy, but ardent youth,
Who speaks to her with simple truth,
While turtle-doves are softly cooing
At their chaste and timid wooing.

When things go wrong and all seems sad
Such a dream will make me glad;
And though it never should come true,

The lovely dream I shall not rue.
The fragrant bloom itself is sweet,
Though we may not its fruitage eat,
And if illusion drugged my brain,
That time I have not lived in vain.

Alas, when cold the day is breaking
The dream has oft a rude awaking,
When I cook breakfast and do chores
While Belinda softly snores.

VII

Some said: "Learn wisdom from the ant";
But I must answer that I can't.
I see her heavy burdens bear.
She lives a life of toil and care
To gather food and rear her brood.

For me the cricket while it sings,
Making music with its wings,
So free from care without ado
For its desires and needs are few.
A symbol of the simple life,
With freedom, but no toil and strife.
Not like us who daily borrow
The cares belonging to the morrow.

And when it sings the evening long
I feel that nature speaks in song.
In every tune of piping Pan,
Of sighing wind and singing man
Will all Eternity rehearse
The music of the Universe.

And though my hours of toil be long,
I feel that life has time for song,

And start some homely old-time lay
To keep the crowding cares away.
I doubt not, were my lot more light
All earth would look to me more bright,
For fortune turns the pessimist
Into a smiling optimist.

If there is something I deride,
It is the pity-spurning pride.
"To be pitied means defeat,
To be envied, oh, how sweet!"
The spirit of the world it is
That speaks and ever spoke like this.

With purest of all human feeling
Supporting, helping, giving, healing,
Pity high and heaven-born
Seeks the lowly, the forlorn!
Love embraces but her own,
Pity goes to all that groan.
She sees the beggar on his round,
The writhing worm upon the ground;
And walks in gloom with silent tread
To find the ill in bunk and bed.

When I lie low and all distressed
'Tis only she who is my guest.
I deem her, though she wanders here,
The daughter of some higher sphere;
For earthly life is on the plan
That they oppress and take who can.

My eye and ear were oft deceiving
And forced upon me wrong believing;
My reason oft led me astray,

My idols were of common clay;
But what my soul and body feel
I know quite well, it must be real.
My pains and joys though now forgot
Who will contend that they were not?
And likewise, too, the faith I feel

I know full well, for me 'tis true,
Howe'er it may appear to you.
I know just how the heathen feels
When he before his idol kneels.
I cannot see his ghost or wraith,
But I bow before his faith.
Whate'er he sees, it draws him higher
Than sordid aim or low desire.
I call it worse than mean deceiving
To rob the faith of the believing.
Our hopes are wandering to the tomb,
The frost of morning blights the bloom,
But hope for heaven beyond the bier
Cannot be disappointed here.
Man will not learn at heaven's portal
That his soul was not immortal.

VIII

I hear them boast with glowing eyes
Of all our country's wealth that lies
In banks and bonds, in coin and stocks,
Or safes secured by patent locks,
In forest, mine and fertile field,
Which every year their billions yield.

I'll tell you what is true of this:
Like one great field our country is,

That grows potatoes, bread and meat,
But scarce enough that all may eat.
Rake some in heaps and call them wealth.
Besides our daily bread and health
There is no such a thing as wealth.
Had each of us his fill to eat
They'd cease exporting pork and wheat.
On fertile field the Hindu starves,
His harvest heaped on English wharves.

My age is nearly thirty-one,
And more than half my life is gone,
Though should I live three score and ten,
The limit set for mortal men.

No matter what the solar time,
We know when man is in his prime.
Life is not timed by circling spheres.
Its latter half contains more years
Than does the first with quicker pace;
For in a life's uneven race,
When walking slow more hours have passed,
But not more steps when comes the last.
The moth that lived its one-day span
Has lived as long as full-aged man.

IX

In solitude, my mind at ease,
I oft make verses such as these:
The fruit that made old Adam fall
Has been distilled to alcohol,
Which now, his children's tempting foe,
Brings wreck and ruin, and crime and woe.

As to tobacco I'm not sure;
It seems a solace to the poor.
I saw a man his clay-pipe fill,
And knew he was not brooding ill.
So like the man who sings a song:
I know he is not bent on wrong.

Ere you increase your helpless brood
Be sure they shall have clothes and food.
If you say oft at early morn:
"Would that I never had been born,"
Make sure that you bear not the blame
That others, later, say the same.

The doctor to the lawyer said:
"Too many spineless fools are bred."
The answer was: "Keep them alive;
They are that you and I may thrive."

Before you praise your country high,
And flaunt its flag against the sky,
See that the rogue with portly gait
Rules not your county, town or state.

The truly great, unknown to fame,
Cares not to see his printed name.

All perfect is the bird's nest called.
No doubt, it finds with it no fault.
Imperfectness—but sentiment!
'Tis naught but human discontent.

Be glad of good, to ill resigned—
Happiness is a state of mind.

X

So many an elder man I meet
Who wanders on with weary feet,
And tells, forgetful of his woe,
That he reared children long ago.

A sorry sight, by hardship sere!
Forsaken by the brood he reared!

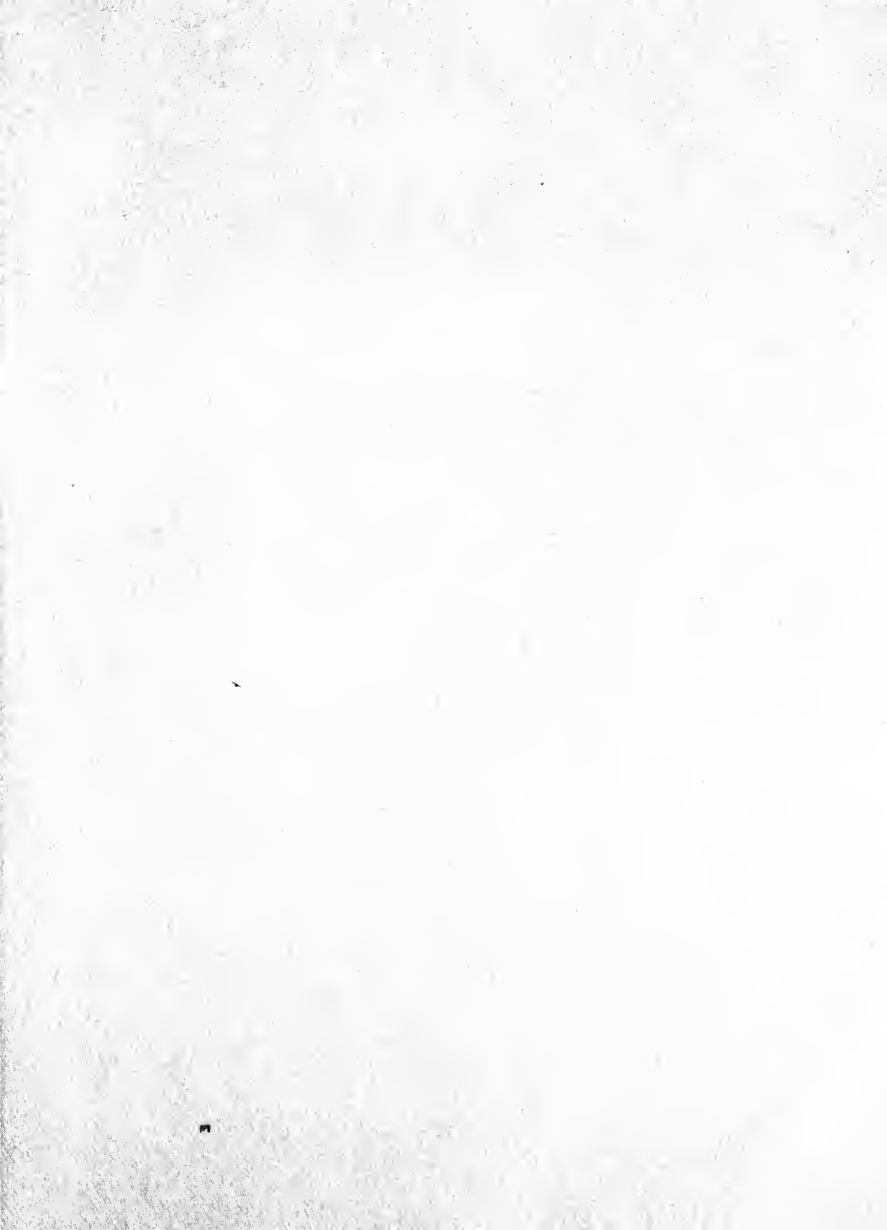
Ungrateful world! but I doubt not
That this shall be my future lot.
An outcast in my native land,
And begging alms from Pity's hand!
And dying slowly day by day
Like the branch with one green spray.

Grim Death! but we no longer fear him
When the years have brought us near him;
When he with chilling clasp of hands
So neighbor-like before us stands.
Then wipe your tears, and be at ease,
When Death comes only to release!

But lay I now upon the bier
Belinda scarce would drop a tear,
Yet put on mourning to perfection,
For dark looks well with her complexion;
And have a husband soon again,
For women can make fools of men.

There be no gravestone nor a wreath
Where my body lies beneath.
'Tis well enough for me to know
That the grass will richer grow,
Just because I lie below.

THE END



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